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ABSTRACT

As community colleges face increasing fiscal scrutiny and constraints, board members have a responsibility to promote an understanding and acceptance of cost-efficiency measures. To do so, trustees themselves should first understand the following fiscal characteristics of community colleges: they are the least expensive of higher education institutions: like hospitals, they are labor-intensive and have fewer discretionary dollars than businesses: and significant program or personnel cuts hinder the ability of the community college to compete with other postsecondary institutions. While it is counterproductive for trustees to manage college finances on an operational level, trustees can set an institutional framework for efficiency by asking appropriate questions of administrators and remaining informed of college management. This requires that trustees be familiar with budgeting, regularly review unit cost studies, develop fiscal policies that eliminate surprise costs by assuring a direct relationship between planning and budgeting, avoid giving the impression of protecting favored programs, require the use of sound business practices in college operations, and communicate confidence in the college's future. Such measures will alleviate staff fears caused by reductions in expenditures and redirect attention to positive strategies that point toward long-term gains. (JP)

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STRETCHING THE EDUCATIONAL DOLLAR.

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Paper presented at the 1981 Central Region Seminar of the Association of Community College Trustees, "Community Colleges--Lifeboats for the Future" (Osage Beach, MO, April 12-14, 1981).

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THE TITLE OF THIS FORUM -- "STRETCHING THE EDUCATIONAL DOLLAR" -- MIGHT BETTER BE TITLED "HOW TO SQUEEZE MORE OUT OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TURNIP!" THE PURPOSE OF THIS SESSION (I WOULD ASSUME) IS TO SUGGEST WAYS THAT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAN INCREASE ITS EFFECIENCY, GAIN GREATER PRODUCTIVITY, AND SQUEEZE MORE OUT OF THAT FIGURATIVE TURNIP. TO ARGUE AGAINST SUCH GOALS WOULD SEEM DOWNRIGHT UNPATRIOTIC!

IT SEEMS ONLY A FEW YEARS AGO WHEN WE TALKED ABOUT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AS A NOBLE MOVEMENT. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE-A-WEEK WAS ESTABLISHED SOMEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY. THE GENESIS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE WAS THAT IT CONVENIENTLY FIT BOTH CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION. TODAY, THERE IS LITTLE REFERENCE TO A MOVEMENT WHEN DESCRIBING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE. RATHER -- AS JUDITH MADONIA, PRESIDENT OF ICCTA, REFERRED TO IN HER PAPER, "POLICIES OF THE EIGHTIES," -- THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE MAY BE VIEWED AS

JUST ANOTHER PART OF THE SOCIAL PROGRAMS AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE 60's.

MRS. MADONIA FURTHER COMMENTS THAT, "THE SAME KIND OF CONCERNS WHICH THE FOLKS AT THE EPA AND AT OSHA ARE NOW SENSING MAY SOME DAY BE DIRECTED AT HIGHER EDUCATION, IN GENERAL, OR AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN PARTICULAR." THEREFORE, IT MAY BE PRESUMPTIOUS TO BELIEVE THAT THE TWO-YEAR INSTITUTION WILL BE EXCLUDED FROM THE KIND OF SCRUTINY THAT OTHER SOCIAL AGENCIES ARE EXPERIENCING.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE BIG BUSINESS, AND THEY SPEND LARGE AMOUNTS OF TAXPAYER DOLLARS. IT SHOULD NOT BE ASSUMED THAT THIS YOUNG AND FRAIL SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION WILL HAVE THE POLITICAL UNDERPINNING OR ESTABLISHED POLITICAL CREDIBILITY TO WITHSTAND ASSAULTS UPON ITS FINANCIAL FOUNDATIONS. THE LEAST TRUSTEES CAN ACCOMPLISH IN FULFILLING THEIR PHILOSOPHIC AND FIDUCIARY ROLES TO THEIR INSTITUTION IS TO UNDERSTAND THE DILEMMAS INHERENT IN IMPLEMENTING A STRATEGY FOR STRETCHING THE EDUCATIONAL DOLLAR AND TO COMMUNICATE LEGITIMATE EXPECTATIONS OF

PERFORMANCE FOR THOSE DOLLARS TO THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY.

I WOULD FIRST PROPOSE SEVERAL BASIC PREMISES THAT MIGHT PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE DOLLARS AND CENTS OF OUR COMMUNITY COLLEGE. FIRST OF ALL, THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS THE LEAST EXPENSIVE OF ANY ASPECT OF HIGHER EDUCATION. THE AMOUNT OF DOLLARS BEHIND EACH STUDENT IS LESS THAN OTHER POST-SECONDARY SYSTEMS. THEREFORE, THE PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS LESS -- SUGGESTING THAT THE EDUCATIONAL DOLLAR IS ALREADY BEING STRETCHED.

SECONDLY, COMMUNITY COLLEGES RADICALLY DIFFER FROM OTHER TYPES OF BUSINESSES. THESE DIFFERENCES MAKE DOLLAR REDUCTIONS MORE COMPLEX THAN A MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY. SPECIFICALLY, COLLEGES SIMILAR, FOR EXAMPLE, TO A HOSPITAL, ARE LABOR-INTENSIVE. FOR MOST COLLEGES, 75% OR HIGHER OF THEIR BUDGETS ARE COMMITTED TO SALARIES AND FRINGE BENEFITS. CUTTING OFF A SHIFT OF STUDENTS OR REDUCING INVENTORY ARE NOT PART OF THE ECONOMICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

WHEN OTHER FIXED COSTS ARE CALCULATED, SUCH AS UTILITIES, SUPPLIES AND CONTRACTUAL SERVICES, THE

AMOUNT OF DISCRETIONARY DOLLARS REMAINING ARE INSIGNIFICANT. THE FLEXIBILITY OF BOARDS AND ADMINISTRATORS TO REDUCE STAFF, INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY, ELIMINATE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES HAVE TO BE BALANCED IN AN EQUATION WITH SUCH FACTORS AS MORALE, QUALITY OF SERVICE, AND COMPETITIVENESS FOR PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL STAFF.

THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR COST CONTAINMENT IN PUBLIC NOT-FOR-PROFIT HOSPITALS FACE SIMILAR PROBLEMS AS THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE. CITIZENS INCREASINGLY EXPECT AND DEMAND SERVICES THAT ARE COSTLY IN TRAINED STAFF AND, IN THE CASE OF HOSPITALS, EQUIPMENT. WITH THE RAPID CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNITY COLLEGES MUST ALSO MAKE COSTLY CAPITAL INVESTMENTS IN ORDER TO TRAIN STUDENTS IN THE STATE OF THE ART. THERE ARE RELATIVELY FEW SHORT-CUTS AVAILABLE TO A COLLEGE COMMITTED TO TECHNOLOGICAL TRAINING. THE LIFE CYCLE OF TECHNOLOGICAL EQUIPMENT, SUCH AS COMPUTERS, IS VERY SHORT. BOTH INDUSTRY AND STUDENTS EXPECT COMMUNITY COLLEGES TO BE IN THE VANGUARD OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE, BUT MANY TAXPAYERS FIND IT DIFFICULT TO COMPREHEND AND SUPPORT THE EXPENSE OF SUCH TRAINING.

THE THIRD PREMISE IS THAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE COMPETITIVE INSTITUTIONS WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION AND WITH OTHER PROVIDERS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES. STUDENTS GENERATE REVENUE THAT SUSTAINS OR OFFSETS COSTS TO THE TAXPAYER. SIGNIFICANT CUTS IN PROGRAMS, ADMINISTRATION, AND SERVICES -- ALONG WITH NON-COMPETITIVE WAGES, EVENTUALLY IMPACT ON THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN STUDENTS. THE LESS STUDENTS, THE HIGHER THE COSTS PER STUDENT. SIMILAR TO ANY BUSINESS, THE FINANCIAL EFFICIENCY OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS BASED ON STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN PROGRAMS.

IF YOU ACCEPT IN PART OR TOTALLY THESE PREMISES, THEN THE QUESTION IS "HOW CAN THE EDUCATIONAL DOLLAR BE STRETCHED?"

IT WOULD BE UNREALISTIC AND INAPPROPRIATE TO SUGGEST THAT YOUR RESPONSIBILITY AS TRUSTEES IS TO MANAGE THESE ECONOMIES ON AN OPERATIONAL OR DAY-TO-DAY BASE.

ALSO, IT WOULD BE EQUALLY UNREALISTIC TO PROPOSE THAT YOUR SPEAKER HAS A FORMULA OR SPECIFIC WAYS IN WHICH YOUR COLLEGE CAN INCREASE EFFICIENCY AND SAVE FUNDS. IF I HAD SUCH KNOWLEDGE, ALL OF YOU WOULD PAY DEARLY FOR MY HELP.

HOWEVER, AS TRUSTEES, YOU CAN ESTABLISH A FRAMEWORK FROM WHICH THE PROCESS OF GAINING GREATER EFFICIENCY FROM LIMITED DOLLARS MAY OCCUR. PERHAPS THE MOST DIFFICULT ASPECT OF ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK IS DETERMINING THE APPROPRIATE QUESTIONS AND DISCIPLINES TO GUIDE INSTITUTIONAL THINKING. UNFORTUNATELY, MANY OF US FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE IN REACTING TO SPECIFIC SITUATIONS OR PROBLEMS IN THE INSTITUTION THAT OFTEN ARE RELATED TO OUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OR EXPERTISE. THE TRUSTEE WITH A SMALL BUSINESS OF TEN EMPLOYEES IS OFTEN FRUSTRATED IN TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEMS OF MANAGING 200 OR 500 DIVERSIFIED EMPLOYEES. THE RULES GOVERNING PERSONNEL ARE NOT THE SAME FOR SUCH DIVERSE ORGANIZATIONS.

TRUSTEES WHO ROLL UP THEIR SLEEVES AND ATTEMPT TO ADMINISTER INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMIES CREATE A NUMBER OF INHERENT DIFFICULTIES. FOREMOST, THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES IS THE FINAL AUTHORITY ON INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES, BUT WHEN TRUSTEES BECOME PRACTITIONERS AND ALSO THE FINAL AUTHORITY, CONFUSION AND MISUNDERSTANDING CAN RESULT. ALSO, WHEN TRUSTEES ASSERT THEMSELVES INTO SUCH A ROLE, ADMINISTRATORS WILL POLITICALLY RETREAT FROM THE FIELD. A DISAGREEMENT ON COST-CUTTING MEASURES BETWEEN ADMINISTRATORS AND TRUSTEES, WHERE TRUSTEES INITIATE THE ACTION, DOES NOT ENCOURAGE AN HONEST DIALOGUE. SUGGESTIONS FOR CUTS AND ECONOMIES ARE QUICKLY MOVED TO THE POLITICAL ARENA AND BEST FOUGHT BY STAFF WITH TRUSTEE SUPPORT.

AT THIS POINT, SEVERAL OF YOU MAY BE SPECULATING THAT IF TRUSTEES ARE NOT ACTIVELY USING THE SCISSORS TO COLLEGE BUDGETS, THEN THEY IN EFFECT HAVE A MINOR OR INCONSEQUENTIAL ROLE IN STRETCHING THE EDUCATIONAL DOLLAR.

I WOULD ARGUE THAT THE TRUSTEES ARE KEY TO DETERMINING IF A PROCESS OF CAREFUL ASSESSMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF EFFICIENCIES OCCUR ON THEIR CAMPUSES. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TRUSTEES IS TO 1) CREATE A POSITIVE INSTITUTIONAL CLIMATE FOR EFFICIENT USE OF RESOURCES ... 2) BE INFORMED OF BASIC FACTS REGARDING THE INSTITUTION ... AND 3) DEVELOP THE APPROPRIATE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE THE INSTITUTION TOWARD THESE GOALS.

WELL, WHAT ARE THESE BOARD STRATEGIES THAT COULD LEAD TO COST EFFICIENCIES? TO BEGIN WITH, TRUSTEES MUST UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITIES OF FUNDING AND BUDGETING. HISTORICAL DATA OF FINANCIAL TRENDS ARRANGED IN NON-TECHNICAL TERMS CAN PROVIDE TRUSTEES WITH AN OVERALL UNDERSTANDING OF WHERE YOUR INSTITUTION IS FINANCIALLY MOVING.

FURTHER, THE COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION SHOULD PROVIDE ON A CONTINUING BASIS, UNIT COST STUDIES WITH AN ANALYSIS SO THAT YOU UNDERSTAND WHERE COSTS ARE RELATIVE

TO OTHER COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND TO PAST YEARS. TRUSTEES SHOULD ASK AND ADMINISTRATORS SHOULD WELCOME YOUR SEEKING OF EXPLANATIONS OF COST DATA. WHEN COSTS SEEM UNUSUAL OR DEVIATE FROM OTHER COMPARABLE DATA, ARE YOU, THE TRUSTEE, SATISFIED THAT THE ADMINISTRATION WAS AWARE OF THEM PRIOR TO A UNIT COST STUDY AND ATTEMPTED TO REDUCE COSTS OR CAN RATIONALIZE WHY THE COSTS WERE BEYOND THE INSTITUTION'S ABILITY TO MODIFY THEM? PRESIDENTS WELCOME THE OPPORTUNITY TO DISCUSS FACULTY/STUDENT RATIOS AND OTHER DIRECT AND INDIRECT COSTS.

TRUSTEES SHOULD BE ASSURED THAT THE INITIATION, REDUCTION, OR ELIMINATION OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES ARE DOCUMENTED IN A BUSINESSLIKE WAY TO ANTICIPATE THEIR CONSEQUENCES. IF THE BOARD IS CAUGHT WITH A SERIES OF SURPRISES IN COSTS, THE INSTITUTION IS IN SERIOUS DIFFICULTY. I HAVE BEEN SURPRISED OVER THE YEARS THAT MANY BOARDS HAVE NOT DEVELOPED A FISCAL POLICY FOR THE INSTITUTION. IF THE TRUSTEES CANNOT RESOLVE THEIR OWN

COMMITMENTS TOWARD BALANCED BUDGETS, CASH FLOW, BORROWING, AND CAPITAL EXPANSION, THEN IT PLACES THE PRESIDENT IN THE PRECARIOUS POSITION OF BASING DECISIONS ON NON-DIRECTION BY TRUSTEES.

FOR INSTANCE, IF OVER A PERIOD OF YEARS, THE DISTRICT RUNS DEFICITS AND BORROWS FOR CASH FLOW AND RESENTS INORDINATE DEMANDS FOR SALARY INCREASES BY EMPLOYEES, THERE IS A PHILOSOPHIC INCONSISTENCY THAT IS DIFFICULT TO RESOLVE. EMPLOYEES ARE SIMPLY EXTENDING THE BOARD'S PHILOSOPHY TO THEIR PERSONAL GAIN. IN ORDER TO REINFORCE COST EFFICIENCY EFFORTS, TRUSTEES MUST SET IN PLACE, INSTITUTIONAL FISCAL POLICIES.

THE CRY FOR EFFICIENCIES BY BOARDS OR ADMINISTRATION, WHILE SANCTIONING THE PRACTICE OF SETTING ASIDE FAVORED PROGRAMS OR ACTIVITIES TO THE SAME SCRUTINY, TELEGRAPHS TO FACULTY AND STAFF THAT THE GOALS OF THE BOARD ARE BASICALLY POLITICAL. THEN WATCH THE SCRAMBLE FOR A FAVORED POSITION ON THE TRUSTEE "PECKING ORDER."

STRETCHING EDUCATIONAL DOLLARS OFTEN TRANSLATES TO DEFERRED MAINTENANCE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT. UNFORTUNATELY, SUCH ACTIONS MAY BE COSTLIER IN THE LONG TERM. TRUSTEES SHOULD BE PROVIDED WITH DATA DOCUMENTING THE SHORT AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF DEFERRED MAINTENANCE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT. BECAUSE THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SERVES A DIVERSIFIED NUMBER OF STUDENT AND COMMUNITY NEEDS, THE BOARD SHOULD ASSURE THE INSTITUTION THAT THERE IS AN AGREEMENT AMONG TRUSTEES TO SUPPORT THE COMPREHENSIVE PHILOSOPHY OF THE COLLEGE.

EFFORTS TO ENCOURAGE EFFICIENCIES BECOME CYNICALLY INTERPRETED WHEN THERE IS AN INFORMAL UNDERSTANDING THAT SOME PROGRAMS OR SERVICES ARE SACRED COWS OF CERTAIN TRUSTEES AND ADMINISTRATORS AND OPERATE UNDER DISCREET POLITICAL EXCEPTIONS TO OTHER PARTS OF THE COLLEGE.

MOST INSTITUTIONS HAVE DEVELOPED LONG-RANGE PLANS AND GOALS. FRANKLY, MOST OF THESE DOCUMENTS SATISFY STATE REQUIREMENTS AND ARE MORE RITUALISTIC THAN REAL. PLANNING CAN AND SHOULD BE AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR

THE COMMITMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES. A COMMUNITY COLLEGE SHOULD IDENTIFY ITS EDUCATIONAL AND SERVICE PRIORITIES AND RECOGNIZE THAT ITS RESOURCES, EVEN DURING FAVORABLE TIMES, DO NOT ALLOW FOR THE CREATION OF MANY EDUCATIONAL OR STUDENT SERVICES BECAUSE THERE IS A NEED. CHOICES HAVE TO BE MADE ON A CRITERIA, INCLUDING A CAREFUL COST ANALYSIS AND THE LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS OF COMMITMENT TO THE INSTITUTION.

ONE INSTITUTION COMMITTED COLLEGE RESOURCES TO A PROGRAM DEPENDENT ON FEDERAL DOLLARS. THE COMMUNITY WAS SO RECEPTIVE TO THE PROGRAM THAT NOW THAT FEDERAL DOLLARS ARE REDUCED, THE INSITUTION IS ABSORBING CRIPPLING COSTS TO MAINTAIN THE PROGRAM. POLITICALLY, THE TRUSTEES ARE CAUGHT WITH A SUCCESSFUL AND POPULAR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AND SERVICE THEY NO LONGER CAN AFFORD.

AGAIN, THE TRUSTEES SHOULD BE ASSURED THAT THERE IS A DIRECT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLANNING AND BUDGETING. THEY SHOULD BE ASSURED THAT THE BUSINESS SERVICES OF THE COLLEGE ARE EFFICIENT AND MANAGED WELL.

PURCHASING, COST INVESTMENT PRACTICES, CONTRACTUAL SERVICES AND MAINTENANCE ARE SEVERAL SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES THAT CAN BE OBJECTIVELY EVALUATED. A COMMUNITY RESOURCE INFREQUENTLY USED BUT VERY HELPFUL ARE THE SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSES AND COMPANIES IN THE COMMUNITY. WITHIN COMPANY RANKS ARE INDIVIDUALS WITH EXPERTISE THAT CAN ASSESS AND EVALUATE A NUMBER OF COLLEGE BUSINESS PRACTICES AND POLICIES.

EXPERIENCE PROVES THAT THESE ORGANIZATIONS ARE FLATTERED AND WILLING TO ASSIST A PUBLIC BODY SUCH AS A COMMUNITY COLLEGE. FOR EXAMPLE, A CUMBERSOME PURCHASING-TO-PAYMENT PRACTICE CAN COST AN INSTITUTION NEEDED DOLLARS. VENDORS WILL BUILD INTO A PRICE THE DELAYS FOR WAITING FOR THEIR MONEY, OR SOME COMPANIES WILL AVOID DOING BUSINESS WITH AN INSTITUTION IF THERE ARE DELAYS IN RECEIVING FUNDS.

TRUSTEES SHARE AN IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITY IN COMMUNICATING TO BOTH THE COMMUNITY AND THE COLLEGE FAMILY, THE INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS TO USE RESOURCES

WISELY AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF OPERATING AN INSTITUTION ON MARGINAL FUNDING. RECOGNITION OF EFFORTS TO OPERATE EFFICIENTLY SHOULD BE EXTENDED TO ADMINISTRATION, FACULTY, AND STAFF. REDUCTIONS IN EXPENDITURES CREATE FEELINGS OF ANXIETY, FRUSTRATION AND EVEN DESPAIR AMONG PEOPLE. THE CONSEQUENCES CAN BE THE LOSS OF QUALITY STAFF, OR WORSE, THE DESPERATION AMONG EMPLOYEES THAT THEY ARE TRAPPED IN A REGRESSIVE INSTITUTION. TRUSTEES CAN SET A POSITIVE ATTITUDE IN FACING ADVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES AND MOST PEOPLE WILL EVENTUALLY RESPOND TO POSITIVE STRATEGIES THAT POINT TOWARD A LONG-RANGE GAIN FOR THEMSELVES AND THE INSTITUTION.

TO ACCOMPLISH THESE GOALS, OPEN AND SKILLFUL COMMUNICATIONS ARE HELPFUL. MOST INDIVIDUALS CAN ABSORB DISAPPOINTMENTS IF THEY ARE ASSURED THAT THERE IS OPEN AND HONEST COMMUNICATION AND THAT THE PROBLEMS ARE SHARED THROUGHOUT THE INSTITUTION. IF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES LACKS CONFIDENCE AND HOPE IN THE INSTITUTION TO WEATHER THE FINANCIAL STORM, IT IS A CERTAINTY THAT

EMPLOYEES WILL FIGHT TO MAINTAIN THEIR PIECE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL TURF. RUMORS, SUSPICION AND, UNFORTUNATELY, PETTY BEHAVIOR ARE PART OF THE DYNAMICS OF STRESS CAUSED BY THE INSECURITY CREATED BY CRUNCHING EDUCATIONAL DOLLARS.

FROM AT LEAST ONE PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE, THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES IS PRIMARY IN SETTING THE INSTITUTIONAL CLIMATE FOR INSTITUTIONAL UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT FOR EFFICIENCIES. THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH GROWTH SO FEW YEARS AGO SEEM MINIMAL WITH THE CHALLENGES FACING MANY INSTITUTIONS IN THE FUTURE. IF THERE EVER WAS A TIME WHEN TRUSTEESHIP IS NEEDED, IT IS NOW ... AND IN THE FUTURE.

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